COURT ORDERS AUTHORIZING
DISCLOSURES AND USE

§ 1.490 Legal effect of order.

The records to which §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part apply may be disclosed if authorized by an appropriate order of a court of competent jurisdiction granted after application showing good cause therefore. In assessing good cause the court is statutorily required to weigh the public interest and the need for disclosure against the injury to the patient or subject, to the physician-patient relationship, and to the treatment services. Upon the granting of such order, the court, in determining the extent to which any disclosure of all or any part of any record is necessary, is required by statute to impose appropriate safeguards against unauthorized disclosure. An order of a court of competent jurisdiction to produce records subject to §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part will not be sufficient unless the order reflects that the court has complied with the requirements of 38 U.S.C. 7332(b)(2)(D). Such an order from a Federal court compels disclosure. However, such an order from a State court only acts to authorize the Secretary to exercise discretion pursuant to 38 U.S.C. 5701(b)(5) and 38 CFR 1.511 to disclose such records. It does not compel disclosure.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7332(b)(2)(D))

§ 1.491 Confidential communications.

(a) A court order under §§ 1.490 through 1.499 of this part may authorize disclosure of confidential communications made by a patient to a treatment program in the course of diagnosis, treatment, or referral for treatment only if:

(1) The disclosure is necessary to protect against an existing threat to life or of serious bodily injury, including circumstances which constitute suspected child abuse and neglect and verbal threats against third parties;

(2) The disclosure is necessary in connection with investigation or prosecution of an extremely serious crime, such as one which directly threatens loss of life or serious bodily injury, including homicide, rape, kidnapping, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, or child abuse and neglect; or

(3) The disclosure is in connection with litigation or an administrative proceeding in which the patient offers testimony or other evidence pertaining to the content of the confidential communications.

(b) [Reserved]

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.492 Order not applicable to records disclosed without consent to researchers, auditors and evaluators.

A court order under §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part may not authorize qualified personnel, who have received patient identifying information from VA without consent for the purpose of conducting research, audit or evaluation, to disclose that information or use it to conduct any criminal investigation or prosecution of a patient. However, a court order under § 1.495 of this part may authorize disclosure and use of records to investigate or prosecute VA personnel.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.493 Procedures and criteria for orders authorizing disclosures for noncriminal purposes.

(a) *Application.* An order authorizing the disclosure of patient records covered by §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part for purposes other than criminal investigation or prosecution may be applied for by any person having a legally recognized interest in the disclosure which is sought. The application may be filed separately or as part of a pending civil action in which it appears that the patient records are needed to provide evidence. An application must use a fictitious name, such as John Doe, to refer to any patient and may not contain or otherwise disclose any patient identifying information unless the patient is the applicant or has given a written consent (meeting the requirements of § 1.475 of this part) to disclosure or the court has ordered the record of the proceeding sealed from public scrutiny.

(b) *Notice.* The patient and VA facility from whom disclosure is sought must be given:

(1) Adequate notice in a manner which will not disclose patient identifying information to other persons; and

(2) An opportunity to file a written response to the application, or to appear in person, for the limited purpose of providing evidence on whether the statutory and regulatory criteria for the issuance of the court order are met.

(c) *Review of evidence: Conduct of hearing.* Any oral argument, review of evidence, or hearing on the application must be held in the judge's chambers or in some manner which ensures that patient identifying information is not disclosed to anyone other than a party to the proceeding, the patient, or VA, unless the patient requests an open hearing in a manner which meets the written consent requirements of § 1.475 of this part. The proceeding may include an examination by the judge of the patient records referred to in the application.

(d) *Criteria for entry of order.* An order under this section may be entered only if the court determines that good cause exists. To make this determination the court must find that:

(1) Other ways of obtaining the information are not available or would not be effective; and

(2) The public interest and need for the disclosure outweigh the potential injury to the patient, the physician-patient relationship and the treatment services.

(e) *Content of order.* An order authorizing a disclosure must:

(1) Limit disclosure to those parts of the patient's record which are essential to fulfill the objective of the order;

(2) Limit disclosure to those persons whose need for information is the basis for the order; and

(3) Include such other measures as are necessary to limit disclosure for the protection of the patient, the physician-patient relationship and the treatment services; for example, sealing from public scrutiny the record of any proceeding for which disclosure of a patient's record has been ordered.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.494 Procedures and criteria for orders authorizing disclosure and use of records to criminally investigate or prosecute patients.

(a) *Application.* An order authorizing the disclosure or use of patient records covered by §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part to criminally investigate or prosecute a patient may be applied for by VA or by any person conducting investigative or prosecutorial activities with respect to the enforcement of criminal laws. The application may be filed separately, as part of an application for a subpoena or other compulsory process, or in a pending criminal action. An application must use a fictitious name such as John Doe, to refer to any patient and may not contain or otherwise disclose patient identifying information unless the court has ordered the record of the proceeding sealed from public scrutiny.

(b) *Notice and hearing.* Unless an order under § 1.495 of this part is sought with an order under this section, VA must be given:

(1) Adequate notice (in a manner which will not disclose patient identifying information to third parties) of an application by a person performing a law enforcement function;

(2) An opportunity to appear and be heard for the limited purpose of providing evidence on the statutory and regulatory criteria for the issuance of the court order; and

(3) An opportunity to be represented by counsel.

(c) *Review of evidence: Conduct of hearings.* Any oral argument, review of evidence, or hearing on the application shall be held in the judge's chambers or in some other manner which ensures that patient identifying information is not disclosed to anyone other than a party to the proceedings, the patient, or VA. The proceeding may include an examination by the judge of the patient records referred to in the application.

(d) *Criteria.* A court may authorize the disclosure and use of patient records for the purpose of conducting a criminal investigation or prosecution of a patient only if the court finds that all of the following criteria are met:

(1) The crime involved is extremely serious, such as one which causes or directly threatens loss of life or serious bodily injury including, but not limited to, homicide, rape, kidnapping, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and child abuse and neglect.